BOX 9. USA – A DEMOCRATIC BREAKDOWN IN THE MAKING?

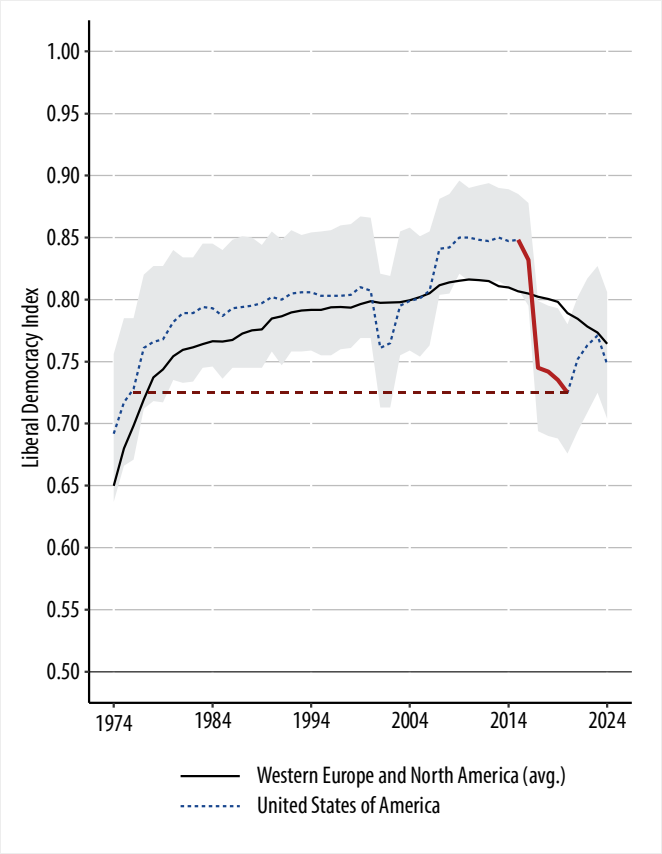
The scale of what is happening in the US is unprecedented and prompts a closer look at what seems to be the fastest evolving episode of autocratization the USA has been through in modern history. Unfortunately, the just released V-Dem data only cover events until 31 December 2024, so we must rely on other sources.

Processes of autocratization during the last 25 years have typically evolved gradually with democratically elected leaders dismantling constraints on executive power by "executive aggrandizement,"[1] and each step becoming the "new normal". President Trump operates openly and acts rapidly to the extent that even cautious analysts like Professor Steven Levitsky say the regime is now some type of authoritarianism.[2] How close is it to a regime breakdown in the making?

USA DEMOCRACY AND TRUMP 1.0

Democracy took a beating during President Trump's first time in office. The LDI fell from 0.85 to 0.73 in those four years, bringing the country back to its 1976 level – far below the regional average (Figure 1). After losing the 2020 election, Trump tried to strongarm election officials to "find" him extra votes, coerce Vice President Pence to alter the results, and watched quietly as insurgents raided Congress. President Biden was installed and American democracy survived, but did not recover fully (Figure 1). It is now *weaker* than when Trump took office in 2017 and is being attacked a lot *more* than before.

FIGURE 1. THE USA VS. REGIONAL AVERAGE, 1974–2024



TRUMP 2.0: A (QUASI) TOTAL ATTACK ON THE INSTITUTIONS

Trump's second administration is proving to be different than his first. Trump ran an openly authoritarian campaign[3] in 2024, pledging to prosecute his rivals, punish critical media, and deploy the army to repress protests.

As of the time of writing, Trump has been in office for six weeks. The speed with which American democracy is coming under strain has taken many observers by surprise. The expansion of executive power, undermining of Congress' power of the purse, offensives on independent and counter-veiling institutions and the media, as well as purging and dismantling of state institutions – classic strategies of autocratizers – seem to be in action. The enabling silence among critics fearful of retributions,[4] is already prevalent.

Attacks on the rule of law

The judiciary is a key institution that autocratizers attack during autocratization,[5] especially in the early phase.[6] A regime transition necessarily requires that rule of law is bent in favor of an aspiring autocrat.

During his first day in office, President Trump pardoned[7] 1,500 criminals convicted for the January 6 Capitol Hill assault. This was one of the first steps in efforts to undermine legitimacy of courts and the rule of law. By excusing and even celebrating past illegal attacks, President Trump has also given a tacit but clear endorsement of future violence,[8] according to experts.

On 6 March, President Trump issued the first executive order[9] directly targeting the law firm representing former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in a move that can be interpreted as weaponizing the state.

President Trump has refused to follow court orders,[10] and claimed that "He who saves his country does not violate any law."[11] This statement seems to reflect in the actions of the administration. There are already over 70 lawsuits filed against President Trump and his administration for breaking the law and the Constitution.[12]

These efforts by the Trump administration to undermine the judicial constraints on executive power recently prompted the American Bar Association to issue a statement on the need to protect the rule of law.[13] The ABA identifies the administration's actions as being especially problematic because they *"knowingly undermine the division of powers between the executive and congressional branches set out within the US Constitution."*[14]

Abolition of accountability institutions

Horizontal accountability – checks and balances – is at the core of republican thinking and liberal democracy.[15] Institutions providing effective checks and balances are therefore typically among the first targets during autocratization.[16] Serious weakening of accountability is one of the early indications of regime

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2 www.nytimes.com/2025/03/06/us/politics/trump-democracy.html
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15 O'Donnell, G. 1998. "Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies". *Journal of Democracy 9(3)*.
16 Sato, Y., et al. "Institutional Order in Episodes of Autocratization". V-Dem Working Paper 133.

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transition. Replacing civil servants with personal loyalists and allies is one known tactic to achieve this.[17]

That line runs through actions taken so far[18] by the Trump administration purging[19] the highest levels of the Department of Defense, the Justice Department, the Department of Homeland Security, Department of State, USAID, and the FBI of those not personally loyal to him. Purges also have signaling effects, discouraging civil servants from questioning actions of the president in the future.

Trump also fired independent Inspector Generals across 17 agencies[20] and is seeking to replace them with loyalists.[21] Similarly, he fired the head of the Office of Special Counsel,[22] who is responsible for protecting whistleblowers. In the following court case, the Justice Department filed an appeal arguing that the court must not encroach on the President's executive authority – one of many actions seeking to expand executive power.[23]

The perhaps most serious challenge comes from violations of Congress' power of the purse enshrined in the Constitution,[24] and the 1974 Impoundment Control Act. These are now discussed as a constitutional crisis in the making.[25] The list of legal cases involving claims to unconstrained power made by the administration is long and revealing of efforts to do away with liberal democracy's foundation of principles of checks and balances.[26]

Purges in the military

During executive-led autocratization, securing passive bystanding by the military is often instrumental.[27] Purging the top-ranks in the military and replacing based on allegiances is a tactic often used.

Trump has started purging the military by removing the nation's highest-ranking military officer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as well as the Chief of Naval Operations, Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force. Replacements have pledged personal loyalty to Trump.[28]

Firing the military's top judge advocates general – who have the independent legal authority to tell that an order from the president or the secretary of defense is unlawful and should not be obeyed, provides another worrying sign of seeking to make the military a subservient bystander.[29]

Attacks on freedom of the media

Suppression of media freedom is the most common weapon of choice among autocratizing leaders over the past 25 years (see Section 3), using tactics from threats and lawsuits, to worse.

Trump started intimidating the media already during his campaign when he repeatedly threatened to strip broadcasting licenses from stations.[30] In the same vein, Trump is threatening to sue publishers and media who use anonymous sources,[31] which would be a big blow to freedom of expression and the media. The effect already materialized with Washington Post (WP) owner Jeff Bezos stopping the WP from endorsing Kamala Harris,[32] and then announcing a "refocusing" WP's editorial stance in a deferral to Trump.

The White House is now claiming[33] it has the right to pick which media and reporters are allowed to cover the President,[34] ripping it away from the White House Correspondents' Association. It so far denied access to HuffPost and the Associated Press reminiscent of the autocratization tactic to stir the rhetoric in favor of the President and retaliate against media who diverge from his views. Such moves towards autocratization also suggests a possible regime transition.

DOGE

A special case of eschewing accountability and dismantling state institutions is the creation of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE)[35] led by billionaire Elon Musk. Notwithstanding its name, it is not a government department and appears to be accountable only to Trump.[36]

Despite his conflicts of interest, Musk has access to sensitive, private, and classified information. In at least 11 lawsuits,[37] plaintiffs argue that DOGE has flouted laws and rules around data and privacy. Due to its opacity, it is not possible to know how far DOGE has gone, but it has already fired tens of thousands of government employees. Among them are United States Agency for International Development (USAID) officers, effectively closing an agency instituted by a Congressional act. That will have grave and enduring consequences not only for the US, but also for democracy globally since USAID was by far the largest actor in the international democracy support community.

Upending the USAID may be the plainest affront on republican-liberal principles of horizontal accountability and the powers of Congress yet. It may also become the first area where the Trump administration's willingness to abide by court rulings and be bound by rule of law, will be put to the ultimate test. With a razor-thin majority, the Supreme Court on 5 March ruled against the administration and in favor of Congress' right to have its appropriations carried out. This may be the litmus test for American democracy.

Given the ongoing assaults, is the USA heading towards democratic breakdown, or not?

American flag behind barbed wire. (Pixabay via Pexels)

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